

# COMMERCE AND "CULTURE"

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WE ALL KNOW with some degree of precision what commerce is, while I, at least, have no understanding of what "culture" is, and it is a word I never use. "Culture" somehow refers to the "higher" things, to "spirituality," and shares the vagueness and contentlessness of those terms. It belongs in the family of other amorphous notions like "genius," "personality," "intellectual," and "creativity," all of which were invented with a noble, if flawed, intention and have inevitably been debased over the two centuries of their currency. This abstraction, "culture," is now used to supplant the instinctive concern with country, putting in its place a factitious loyalty and fostering a dangerous insensitivity to real politics. In the communist countries there are "culture" commissars who weave the floral overlay for the tyrannies that were supposed to produce the higher "culture." In the liberal democracies, aside from the sociologists who entertain us with descriptions of drug and rock "cultures," among others, we have a "culture" establishment which has ever less learning or inspiration and a large part of which performs the function of persuading us that the Marxist critique of crass commercialism has no relation to Stalinism, and that we can still expect dialectical materialism to eventuate in the realm of freedom and the full development of personality.

The notion of "culture" was formed in response to the rise of commercial society. So far as I know, Kant was the first to use the word in its modern sense. (Of course, every important change in language goes back to a profound change in thought.) He uses it in a context where he is discussing the contribution of J.-J. Rousseau to the articulation of the human problem. Rousseau's earlier works, the discourses *Arts and Sciences* and *Origins of Inequality*, had, according to Kant, revealed the true contradiction that makes man incomplete

and unhappy: the opposition between nature and civilization, man's animal needs and contentment, on the one hand, and his social duties and acquired arts and sciences on the other. But, according to Kant, Rousseau in his later works, *Emile*, *Social Contract*, and *Nouvelle Héloïse*, proposed a possible unity that harmonized the low natural demands with the high responsibilities of morality and art. This unity Kant called "culture." His three *Critiques* were an attempt to systematize "culture." The first finds limits to nature as revealed by science, a realm of moved matter where all causation is mechanical. The second establishes the possibility of a realm of freedom in which will and hence responsibility are conceivable. And the third founds an entirely new realm, the aesthetic, where imagination can have free play and man's longings for beauty and purposiveness can have substance. Taken together the *Critiques* provide the philosophic grounds of "culture," and the life informed by all three would be truly cultured. This system takes account of all the possibilities of the soul in its richness and depth. The announcement of a new clarity about the true articulation of the human potential promised fulfillments of a level previously unattained.

However, the bright promise obscures the somber background against which it emerged. Modern science had appeared to have shown that nature is soulless, that the beautiful cosmos, imitated by the fine arts, is a product of groundless imagination. Correspondingly, the modern science of man denied that man is the being naturally directed to virtue and knowledge and asserted instead that, akin to all the other beings, his sole concern is his preservation. Thus nature, the permanent ground of all things, the source of being, provides no support for man's humanity. Rousseau's powerful rhetoric was directed against the practical consequence of this theoretical understanding—commercial society and its typical atom, the *bourgeois*. Commercial society, politics stripped of imaginary goals, is dedicated to the unabashed pursuit of well-being. Its very success is vouchsafed by purifying itself of the constraints of patriotism, liberality, nobility, and other grand traits, in favor of self-interest and utility. It is in response to the economic man that the cultural movement came into being, either as a corrective to liberal society or as a radical rejection of its mercenary morals and its philistinism.

### SPECTACULAR DEMANDS

This movement never seriously questioned the science of nature which underlay liberal society. There was almost no attempt to return

to the older understanding of nature, a nature informed by mind. The quest was for a new dimension of reality as a supplement to nature which could account for spirituality. Dualisms like nature and freedom, nature and art, nature and history became the order of the epoch, with the latter term of each of the pairs intended to have primacy. But the weightiness or, one might say, the gravity of nature overbore or tipped the balance. No one could doubt the existence of matter or deny the power of Newtonian science; but Kant's postulates or Hegel's spirit, however impressive, do not simply compel belief. Similarly, the march of the new economy throughout the world was visible to all; the progress of the aesthetic education of mankind was, to say the least, not entirely clear. A vague sense of groundlessness pervaded those who sought for alternatives to pure naturalism. Idealism, historicism, romanticism, Marxism, and finally nihilism are the familiar names of schools which represented the new enthusiasms and corresponding disappointments in the search for the spirit. The use of the word "creativity," never before applied to anyone but God, gives some sense of the problem faced. Nature has no formal or final causes; nothing that is can account for the artist and his productions. He must be assimilated to God, must make something from nothing. But in the sublunar world *ex nihilo nihil fit* seems to apply, and the great structures tend to collapse back into nature. One need only look at the progress of the word "sublime" from Kant to Freud, and with it the movement from woman as the civilizer, moralizer, and object of ideal longings in Rousseau and Goethe, to woman in the science and literature of the twentieth century.

The artificial or abstract character of "culture" comes to light when one recognizes that nobody serious does anything for the sake of "culture"—or it is only recently that men do so, now that they are apparently for the first time willing to live so as to represent the conceits of intellectuals. Men and women die for their country, for their gods, and perhaps even for the truth, but not for culture. Scientists seek to comprehend nature's phenomena, statesmen to found and maintain just regimes, artists to represent beautiful bodies, and philosophers to know the first causes of all things. The motives are diverse and not necessarily conciliable. There is a commonsense reason to follow any one of these ways of life, and there are faculties appropriate to each. To establish their unity in "culture" is a task of colossal proportions, one which has not been successfully completed. Until this task is successfully completed, "culture" as a general category will have a tendency to distort its components. "Culture" somehow always means that man's higher activities have their source in human spontaneity or creativity, an interpretation which has more or less plau-

sibility when applied to poetry or painting, but one resisted by the facts when applied to science or philosophy. The claims of science and philosophy are subverted without discussion by the "culture" interpretation. They become cultural expressions, relative to specific cultures, dependent on them and existing for them rather than for the sake of getting beyond cultures to nature. The quarrel between poetry and philosophy, which was previously thought to be the fundamental issue, is thus covered over by the triumph of the poetic perspective. Finally, God becomes man's creation rather than the reverse, a perspective fatal to religion or any kind of faith. Something like what we mean by "culture" may very well be the result of religion, but the beauty of the churches can only be understood as a denigration of human beauty and a devotion to the God who revealed himself. Only when the true ends of society have nothing to do with the sublime does "culture" become necessary as a veneer to cover over the void. Culture can at best appreciate the monuments of earlier faith; it cannot produce them.

It is most revealing that there is no Greek word that can even remotely translate "culture," and Greece is perhaps the peak example of what is said to be "culture." Pericles, in the fullest statement about Athens which we possess, attributes Athens' greatness—the peak of the peak—to the Athenian regime, to a political order to which men were committed body and soul. Alluding to the surpassing beauties which constitute Athenian "culture" for us, he says only that "we are lovers of beauty with economy, lovers of wisdom without softness." All the statues and temples and spectacles are for him merely the epiphenomena of the core, love of country. In what is perhaps the most spectacular demand on patriotism ever made, he asks the citizens to have an *eros* for the city; from this all else will flow. He is as good an authority about what is central and what peripheral as are our "culture" critics. Our regimes do not ask so much nor can we give them so much. Their sublime moments are only in their foundings and preservation. The distinction between private and public undermines the unity of spiritual strength, draining the public of the transcendent energies while trivializing them because the merely private life provides no proper stage for their action. Thucydides, who puts in the mouth of Pericles all that I have ascribed to him, ironically hides himself in the account of Athens and all of Greece while showing that the hope for perfect unity of the human powers, actually held by Pericles and parodied by Plato, is ill-founded. His book, one of the most perfect of all the beauties, is not culture-bound. He drew the lessons from Greece as a possession of use to the thoughtful for all time.

Our notions of "culture" and of the intellectuals who practice it are too grand for Periclean patriotism and refuse the lonely Thucydidean adherence to eternity. The intellectuals neither face the stern demands of the political nor the even sterner demands of the transpolitical. They advertise their superiority to political practice but are absolutely in its thrall. So many of them are Marxists because Marxism combines the charm of political action with that of philosophy. It is no accident that Marxist theory and practice use the intellectuals as tools and keep them in brutal subservience. The union of materialism and idealism in Marxism (e.g., dialectical materialism) is absolutely incoherent. The mature Marx appears to have recognized this inasmuch as he never seriously discusses the arts or education—that is, "culture." His later works show how "culture," after the supreme efforts of giants such as Kant, Hegel, and Schiller, tended to be swallowed up again by commerce. Again, nothing comes from nothing, and the higher can be reduced to the lower but cannot be derived from it. The distinction between the world of commerce and that of "culture" quickly became the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure, with the former clearly determining the latter. And this was much more sinister than the old vulgarity of commerce which made no great promises of ideal fulfillments. The intellectuals are the new class of men—neither statesmen nor philosophers—who are the purveyors of the false promise, those who most reveal the groundlessness of the spirit. This is captured marvelously well by Flaubert in M. Homais, the vulgarian who loves "culture" and finally wants to become a bohemian. The *Geisteswissenschaften* were after all just entertainment for the *bourgeoisie*. This legitimated Flaubert's incipient nihilism.

### THE MOST DARING PROJECT

So the "culture" movement is something new, a response to modern society, or more correctly to liberal democracy, the commercial republic, hence a response to a novel *political* condition. This political condition was itself a product of rational choice, of a philosophic project. For the first time regimes were to be founded on reason, a new dawn for mankind, a world free of the terrible prejudices on which nations were formerly based; and at the very moment of their actualization, there was a revulsion against them on the part of much of the cultivated part of humanity.

In order to judge the legitimacy of this reaction, one must look again at the intellectual roots of modern politics (for it had intellectual roots) in order to see how the profound and comprehensive minds

who initiated it understood what they were about. It is not to be believed that men such as Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke had no sense of the fullness of the soul. It is rather that they undertook a cost-benefit analysis with total awareness that some losses have to be suffered in order to make some gains and were prepared to live with the losses. We, on the other hand, have succumbed to the ever-present desire to have our cake and eat it, or to put it baldly, have lost sight of the necessary and the possible.

I must give a superficial and popular account of the most daring and far-reaching project ever conceived by man, of what d'Alembert called "the conspiracy" of Enlightenment. It was an attempt to alter completely the character of political life on the one hand, and intellectual life on the other. But above all it was an attempt to alter the relationship between the two, and it is that relationship which is the privileged perspective of thoughtful men. The image of the transformation is projected by Machiavelli, who appears on the scene almost as a beggar, as a suppliant, humbly beseeching a glorious prince to look down upon him with favor. This was the permanent relation of wisdom and power as understood by the old philosophers. But in a sudden shift, Machiavelli, still covertly but with expectations of perfect openness in the future, himself becomes the prince. He plots the means for the wise to seize the levers of power and actualize the dream of philosophers becoming kings, a dream as old as political philosophy itself. But precisely for Plato it was only a dream, and dreams must give way before reality. The fact that the dream is a dream meant that philosophers in the real world have to make their plans accordingly, lower their expectations, and keep their distance from the powers. Machiavelli and his followers reversed all that, and it is in this dispensation which we still live.

To begin from the political side, the new political science can be understood to be a great humanitarian endeavor. For all the nobility of ancient political science, it offered no way to realize its high goals. Human beings still suffered from as many ills as they always had. Practically, it offered only endurance or resignation. What men need is peace, stability, law, order, and relief from poverty and disease. The ancients talked only about virtue and not about well-being. That in itself is perhaps harmless, but the moderns contended that the concentration on virtue contradicts the concern for well-being. Aristotle admitted that "equipment" as well as virtue is necessary for happiness, but he said nothing about how that equipment is acquired. A careful examination of the acquisition of equipment reveals that virtue impedes that acquisition. Liberality, for example, presupposes money

and not caring for it overmuch. But one must care for it to get it. Moreover, spending money exhausts it, so that liberality makes the need for acquisitiveness greater than it would have been without the virtue. Liberality both discourages and encourages acquisitiveness, putting man in contradiction with himself. This virtue is too weak to overcome selfishness, but is powerful enough to prevent certain positive effects which selfishness might cause. The miser is not likely to need to steal. And his quest for profit can, properly channeled, produce benefits for others. In the old system he is given a bad conscience and a bad name. But it would seem that nature is not kind to man, if the two elements of happiness—virtue and equipment—are at tension with one another. Equipment is surely necessary, so why not experiment with doing without virtue? If a substitute for virtue can be found, the inner conflict that renders man's life so hard could be resolved.

This is what Machiavelli means when he says that men ought not to do as they ought to do but ought to do as they do do. Which means that men are actually not doing as they do, but at least partly doing as they ought to do. And this they ought not to do. He puts this with outrageous clarity when he says men are never all good or all bad, implying that since they cannot be all good (for self-love is an inextinguishable part of us) they ought to be all bad. In this way alone can they overcome their dividedness. But if the distinction between good and bad in man is suppressed, then the badness, the standard for determining the bad, is also suppressed. In short, if the passions remain while the virtues which govern them disappear, the passions have unrestricted rights, by nature. They can be judged only in terms of their desirable or undesirable social effects. This is how the despised usurer is miraculously transformed into the respected banker. The new political scientists decided to abandon the pedantic and fruitless practice of inveighing against the passions and to become instead their accomplice for the sake of effectiveness. Instead of asking men to think of the common good, which they were unlikely to do, they told them to think of themselves, which they were strongly inclined to do, and to transform loyalty, patriotism, and justice into calculations of benefit. After *Prince XVI* the theoretical foundations of commercial society have been laid, just as the new argument for democracy is well begun in *IX*. There Machiavelli removes the moral basis of aristocratic rule by denying that aristocrats are any less concerned about money than are oligarchs. Equality begins in modern thought in the assertion that there is no politically relevant public spiritedness. Men are all equally selfish. Men's concern for their

preservation and their comfort can, if the waters are not muddied by extrinsic considerations, be motors for the production of prosperity. The passions, instructed by the philosophers as to their true meaning and end, will suffice; and the collaboration of the philosophers with the passions results in the formula of commercial society, enlightened self-interest. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of property were just what Aristotle did not talk about. They are the conditions of happiness; but the essence of happiness, according to Aristotle, is virtue. So the moderns decided to deal with the conditions and to let happiness take care of itself. At most they talked about the pursuit of happiness. No longer was the concern for the rare perfection of man; the focus became our common vulnerability and suffering. Politics came to be the care of the body, and the soul slipped away.

The new vision of man and politics was never taken by its founders to be splendid. Naked man, gripped by fear or industriously laboring to provide the wherewithal for survival, is not an apt subject for poetry. They self-consciously chose low but solid ground. Civil societies dedicated to the end of self-preservation cannot be expected to provide fertile soil for the heroic or the inspired. They do not require or encourage the noble. What rules and sets the standards of respectability and emulation is not virtue or wisdom. The recognition of the humdrum and prosaic character of life was intended to play a central role in the success of real politics. And the understanding of human nature which makes this whole project feasible, if believed in, clearly forms a world in which the higher motives have no place. One who holds the "economic" view of man cannot consistently believe in the dignity of man or in the special status of art and science. The success of the enterprise depends precisely on this simplification of man. And if there is a solution to the human problems, there is no tragedy. There was no expectation that, after the bodily needs are taken care of, man would have a spiritual renaissance—and this for two reasons: (1) men will always be mortal, which means that there can be no end to the desire for immortality and to the quest for means to achieve it; and (2) the premise of the whole undertaking is that man's natural primary concern is preservation and prosperity; the regimes founded on nature take man as he is naturally and will make him ever more natural. If his motives were to change, the machinery that makes modern government work would collapse.

The historicism, romanticism, and idealism that built on the Enlightenment foundations were—from the point of view of the originators of modern political philosophy—building castles in the air, dreaming that the classical good and noble would emerge out of mod-



ern utility and selfishness, Plato's ideas out of Descartes' extension. The first discipline modernity's originators imposed upon themselves was that of self-restraint, learning to live with vulgarity. Their high expectations for effectiveness were made possible by low expectations of what was to be.

Science, then, became active; and its motto was "give us your tired, your poor. . . ." But the benefactors, too, had a motive. By their usefulness to mankind at large they expected to get gratitude and, thereby, a freedom hitherto unavailable to them. Gratitude, according to Machiavelli's analysis, is an effective motive when there is hope of future benefaction, not when there is only memory of past benefaction. Gratitude is, in other words, ultimately a function of fear. Power, present and future, and the opinion thereof, is the only guarantee of men's goodwill. Men previously did not have the opinion that science is powerful, nor was it. To have a secure position in civil society, science both had to be productive of power and to appear to be so. Innovations in politics and medicine, patently useful to men, were to be the signs of science's special status as a powerful benefactor warring against men's darkest fears of death and destitution.

### ENLIGHTENMENTS

Perhaps it would be useful to describe Plato's account of the philosopher's relation to civil society, and to show how the moderns undertook to transform it. The image of that relation is projected throughout Plato's dialogues in the person of Socrates and the situations in which he finds himself, most starkly of course in the fact that the city puts him to death for being a philosopher. The discussion in the *Republic* of philosopher-kings—a passage most relevant for our considerations—culminates in the cave likeness where civil society is seen as a dark cave where men are prisoners. Escape from the cave is the central concern of the philosopher. Adeimantus, in what amounts to an accusation of Socrates, asserts that the philosophers appear to be either useless or vicious. Plato, as I have suggested, teaches that ultimately this is an appearance that cannot be reversed, and this insures the philosophers' permanent marginality. They appear useless because they are. They are neither artisans, nor statesmen, nor rhetoricians. They are idlers who contribute nothing to security or prosperity. Their peculiar contemplative pleasures are not accessible to the majority of mankind, and they do not provide for the popular pleasures as do the poets. They are relatively insensible to bodily needs

and, most important, have come to terms with the fact of death which terrorizes the many. There is really no point of contact. Plato always treats the relation of *dēmos* to philosopher as that of ignorance to knowledge. He says a multitude can never philosophize and hence can never recognize the seriousness of philosophy or who really philosophizes. Attempting to influence the multitude results in forced prostitution. The natural allies of the philosophers are the gentlemen, whose bodily needs are attended to because they have money and are not compelled to make it, who have a proud disdain for death, and who display their independence by a love of beautiful and useless things, among which can be philosophy, not because they are philosophers but because they have an inkling of its nobility. The philosophers, therefore, favor the rule of gentlemen, with all their prejudices, their merely conventional superiority, their preference for the noble over the reasonable.

The modern philosophers, as I have sketched out their teaching, turned this around by making themselves useful to the many. They recognized the possible reasonableness of the people. Not that the people would ever have the desire or the capacity to pursue the truth for its own sake. But they can and usually do calculate quite well about their preservation and gain. Once one accepts their irrational premise—that death can be avoided—from there on out they make excellent use of reason in a way that gentlemen, who regard calculation about preservation and gain as base, do not. This is an observation to which Adam Smith gives the fullest testimony.

There is a kinship between the vulgar and philosophy that was recognized by the ancient philosophers as well; but, again, the overcoming of the fear of death was critical for them, and they did not envision philosophy becoming useful to that passion. But if the people learn to seek power rationally, and if scientists as a by-product of their activity provide the greatest power, then the scientists are accepted, encouraged, and deferred to by the reason of the people. There is a rational meeting ground of the people and the philosophers, and there is no further need of the aristocrats. The two great powers meet. The philosophers need money and freedom, and that is what they get. Of course, there is a certain ambiguity about what reason means, an ambiguity that must be forgotten before there can be full-blown utilitarianism. (The ironical character of the partnership is very beautifully expressed in the first sentence of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.) Enlightenment of the cave-dwellers who had previously lived in the dark is now possible because they need only learn to follow their self-interest rather than transcend it. The communication between the

people and their preceptors must always be in terms of those prosaic things about which they can calculate, mostly health and property.

As to the viciousness of the philosophers, the meaning of this complaint is succinctly expressed in the charge that the philosophers do not "hold the gods the city holds." And this accusation is most true. The quest for wisdom begins in doubt of the conventional wisdom about the highest things. The most cherished beliefs of the community, the collective hopes and fears, are centered on its gods. The unpardonable thing is to be beyond those hopes and fears, beyond the awe and shame the gods impose. Such are the philosophers who look to nature, and its unchanging uniformity, who finally deny that the gods protect the city. These men arouse horror and terror, anxiety that vengeance will be called down on the city that harbors them. From the very origins of philosophy the enemies of the philosophers have been the priests; the religious and wise have been at war at least since Teiresias and Oedipus fought for the trust of the Thebans. It was the charge of impiety that caused Socrates' execution. And this is where the category "culture" becomes confusing and obfuscating. The arts, particularly poetry, have very much to do with the gods, with the horizon of the cave. Whatever the poets may believe, their poetry must necessarily appeal to the needs and the tastes of the people. In the greatest cases the poets teach the people about the gods. The war between philosophy and poetry of which Socrates speaks has much to do with the religious question, especially with poetry's special kinship to the passions at the root of fanaticism. This tension in the realm of "culture" is present in all the arts.

The response of Plato and Aristotle was to attempt a reform of poetry. Contending that poetry would always be needed, they wanted it to calm and purge the passions of pity and fear. It would make men not reasonable but more open to reason, less in the grip of religious terror, more tolerant. This is the complement to their politics which relied on the gentleman. Music education was to be the formation of the gentleman's taste.

The moderns, on the other hand, regarded this solution as insufficient and declared war on the priests and along with them the arts that supported them. They undertook to cut out what they understood to be the root of religious fanaticism, imagination. From the time Machiavelli attacked the ancients for building imaginary republics, there was a sustained effort to destroy the effects of imagination in politics and science. Descartes' radical doubt is nothing but an attempt to make the world safe from imagination's productions. Hobbes tries to persuade men that the experience of the fear of violent

death is the fundamental experience. It is one that dispels all the imaginary causes of fear. The moderns are much more radical than the ancients in their criticism of imagination. Plato and Aristotle are more nuanced about imagination, partly because they thought that its power in the soul is such that it must be compromised with, partly because of the purely theoretical difference with the moderns as to how seriously science must take the prescientific world. However much ancient and modern thinkers have in common, the relation between the arts, on the one hand, and science on the other, was fundamentally altered by the moderns' political project.

It is not true, as the moderns appear on the surface to say, that men in civil society are always motivated by utility, by self-interest. They could be, but actually imaginary republics affect their consciences and consciences. They frequently do as they ought to do. This can only be corrected, as the moderns would have it, if the shadows of the "ought" are dispelled in favor of the "is." Then self-interest, informed by science, can become the enlightened self-interest on which commercial society rests. Not only must science provide the useful; it must do critical battle with the old religions on all fronts. The rooting out of the enthusiastic in man goes hand in hand with a certain anti-artistic bias in the great men who performed the operation. This does not mean that they were not men of the subtlest intellect and refined taste. But art is secondary, more adornment or entertainment than substance. Their grand styles seem to be more reminiscences of the old world than inner necessities of their thought. The response to their project by a poet who saw what was happening can be found in Swift's *Voyage to Laputa* and *Battle of the Books*.

So the answer to the question whether commercial society is hostile to "culture" must be yes. But this is in large measure because "culture" was invented to correct or oppose commercial society. It is almost a matter of definition. "Culture" implied an opposition between art and science, and a preference for the former. Science was flourishing at the moment of the cultural revolution. The profoundest element of that revolution was its criticism of the egotistic spring of action on which commercial society is founded. By its very principle such society does not find a place for the moral, political, and religious greatness on which great art is founded.

### GIVING RIGHTS TO VULGARITY

The question is whether the critics of the commercial society properly assessed the greatness and subtlety of their Enlightenment

predecessors. Bacon, Locke, Descartes, Hume, and all the others knew they were giving rights to vulgarity. But in so doing—in addition to caring for men's well-being—they were providing rights for themselves. The real need that commercial society has for the learned, its discouragement of fanaticism and encouragement of the tolerance necessary for trade, its effect of softening manners, all gave guarantees of an atmosphere of freedom. The production of wealth was to be beneficial to all—the refined as well as the ordinary—while breaking down the walls of prejudice which had dominated all previous societies. Thus businessmen were to be the allies of the philosophers. One need only read Adam Smith (as one fears modern economists do not) to see that there were no illusions about the characters of businessmen, and that their tastes and morals were not considered fit to dominate society. But the alliance the philosophers made with them was more surely founded on the self-interest of both parties than the unreliable alliances made in the past with priests, tyrants, or even gentlemen. For gentlemen from time to time wanted splendid things, but they were never truly attached to reason, and because they were less oppressed by the needs to which science ministered, they could never really be ruled by philosophers. Locke was surely contemptuous of manufacturers, but he hid that contempt. This was part of the arrangement. And from the heights of a Locke, or a Thucydides for that matter, the difference between what we ordinarily call "culture" and business coarseness is not all that important. The real heights never had much of a place in civil society.

In the new order a Locke was free—with almost no danger of being interfered with—to think his sublime thoughts, to seek the first causes of all things, to understand the nature of things. He could talk with his friends and teach the young. And there was money enough. The academies and universities satisfied Socrates' empty claim that he deserved to be fed in the *prytaneum*. The free lunch for philosophy and science was, precisely, the invention of commercial society. This marvelous situation has prevailed now for two hundred and fifty years. Of all the promises made by commercial society, the freedom of the mind is the one that has been best redeemed. This may not be the best condition for the flourishing of the mind, but that it exists is beyond reasonable doubt. Every other kind of regime that has presented itself during this long time has assaulted that freedom.

Now Bacon, Locke, and the others expected to have an effect on society—the most important effect may very well have been the respectability they gained for themselves—but they knew the effect would not be equal to the cause. The beauty of their minds could not be incarnated in the body or the deeds of the city. They were not

trying to rebuild Athens or Florence. They were not cultural determinists. The potential of the human intellect can be actualized without such a base. The highest activities are always essentially lonely and private, and these men had a robust sense of their independence and the ultimate self-sufficiency of the mind. In this they were just like Socrates. The only change they operated was to bring philosophy out of the closet into the open, instead of seeking protection behind a little wall like men in a storm. Of course, in so doing they made philosophy, on the one hand, more vulnerable to the public if the hopes of controlling the public are not fulfilled, and, on the other, put at risk that inner intransigence, that disdain for public opinion, which is the necessary condition of the quest for truth. Not only the rewards but the new responsibilities might provide irresistible temptations to compromise. But again, in essence they understood their resource to be the knowledge of unchanging nature.

In the later critics there was, as I have said, perhaps not sufficient awareness of the depth of their predecessors nor the nature of their project. The recognition of rights which had been wrested with such labors from a hostile mankind was taken for granted. By the nineteenth century, the intellectuals' privileged position was an independent given; they began openly to withdraw recognition from their partners, the producers of wealth. The philistinism which is the condition of the intellectuals' prosperity became intolerable to their overrefined tastes. It is possible that commercial society is ultimately deadly to the arts and philosophy, but then we must also abandon modern egalitarianism and the useful science which made possible both prosperity and longer lives. Some were prepared to do this, but most were not. Those possessed by the romantic longing for the Middle Ages were not always fully conscious of what such a return would entail.

Moreover, because the new movements accepted the Enlightenment's teaching about nature as well as its great social and political activism, there was a loss of the independent footing which was the leading quality of all the greatest minds of the past. Thought, art, religion all became cultural phenomena, somehow in the service of a "culture." While claiming great superiority, there was a tacit, and sometimes explicit, awareness that the cultured belonged to this here and now—this civilization, this culture, this cave. Their roots are in the past, the present, or the future of this culture. Their sense of themselves can only come from it. They need it desperately and at the same time despise its public opinion. What was pride in earlier thinkers becomes in them vanity. Socrates criticized the Athenians

but did not complain about them. He never expected recognition from them and above all did not need it. But this is not true of intellectuals who, in the absence of eternity, have been imprisoned by history. There was much to the criticism of commercial society, but it seems rather to have radicalized the problem. Only men of the stature of Goethe provide models of a quest to find real independence; this means, in the first place, coming to terms with what is and finding ways of greatness that do not depend on reforming the world first. As Goethe recognized, for this the old Greek philosophers are still the best guides. They knew there is always a mess.

Commercial, or liberal, society has muddled along, more or less healthy, more or less believing in itself, more or less (unfortunately nowadays rather more) intimidated by its "culture" critics. For almost two hundred years they have been of two kinds, men of the Right and men of the Left. The Left has always been more powerful and now is close to total victory. It has been more powerful because it is really just a radicalization of the materialism and the egalitarianism that proved so successful in the modern project. The Left has removed the constraints on vulgarity and selfishness that were so carefully built into the project by its originators, particularly the privacy which was essential to virtue in a regime whose public goal is not virtue. It is populism with pretensions. It points out the cultural impoverishment of the *bourgeoisie* and somehow manages to argue that the defeat of the *bourgeoisie* will restore and enhance "culture." But if, as Nietzsche and common sense argue, it is a low egotism connected with egalitarianism that threatens the higher, then the *bourgeoisie* is just a middle ground in a cultural descent from aristocracy to socialism. However that may be, there is no doubt that however foolish, merely snobbish, or even dangerous, the men of the Right (including most of the great novelists and poets) could be, some of them had a genuine concern for "culture" in whatever serious sense it might have, while the Left (particularly in its Marxist variety) is only preoccupied with economics, fobbing us off with abstractions while undermining what serious art there has been, with the possible exception of Brecht. The Right rejected the modern project in a variety of ways because its adherents had an experience of beauty for which they could not find a place in modern theory and practice. The Marxists had no such experience; their movement just wanted to include all that was said to be good, while actually they could talk seriously only about the body and its needs. Although Eliot's criticism and social theory are trivial, they certainly came out of his felt needs as a poet. There are few, if any, comparable examples to be found within Marxism.

## DISTANT LIGHTS AND APPROACHING TORCHES

But perhaps the Right/Left alternative is not necessarily exhaustive in this matter. The quiet voice of Tocqueville can teach us much. He was the last delicate bloom of that brilliant aristocracy of the *ancien régime*. His soul quivered with responsiveness to the finest and rarest things; it was surely more refined than that of most of the complainers about our vulgarity. His description of Pascal and the improbability of his like in the new order is searing. His was a rare palate. But look at the spiritual health with which he accepts modern democracy, where there is little place for his kind. He never doubted the superior justice of democracy. Against the Left, he argues that extreme equality can destroy justice and that certain good things of the past would have a difficult life in a democracy. Against the Right, he argues that there were severe intellectual failings in the order they still cherish, and he provides a model of taste in the changing world that the Right cannot match. His attempt is to preserve an awareness of the permanent and perfect in the changing and imperfect. All real regimes are changing and imperfect. It is a most serious responsibility of the thinker to glimpse the eternal while living in the ephemeral. It is a great, a fatal, error to commit that eternal to the ephemeral. Distance is what is required, but one has to begin from where one is. Tocqueville's chapters on the intellectual life of the Americans are the best thing ever written on our peculiar intellectual vices and dangers, without trying to give anyone the impression that things were ever much better in reality, without engendering sentimentality or petulance. He outlines the task that the seeker after eternity faces within the particular horizon of this regime. Each of the aspects of human spiritual endeavor is treated on its own, not lumped together as "culture." For some of them there is more hope in democracy, for others less. But there is a continuing respect for the permanence of the human longing for the true and the beautiful. Reading these chapters inevitably causes a sweet sadness. But perhaps that is just right for us. One cannot read them seriously without becoming a bit cultivated, which at least partly means to become self-aware by measuring ourselves against the permanent human alternatives. It is only when we no longer are aware of them that we will be barbarians.

And it is this loss of awareness with which we are faced, and not because of commerce or, at most, only partly so. Tocqueville prescribed for our ills a small number of universities dedicated to the study of the Greek and Latin classics, works he thought particularly suited to



counterpoise our tendencies and give experience of what we are not likely to see around us. It is the universities in a commercial society that must be the repositories of the highest things because for various reasons neither the government, the workplace, nor the church can care for them. And liberal democracy lavishly supported these centers of subversion of, these standing reproaches to, its life. Practically anything could be thought or said in them.

For "culture," what are called "the humanities" is the crucial area. The humanities are now failing, not for want of support but for want of anything to say. The study of those old books, for their own sakes, for the wisdom and the taste they give us, is no longer vital, certainly not in the way the Bible was and still partly is for the religious, or Aristotle was for the philosophic. "Culture" has ended up as the collection of past illusions in a museum of which we are the curators. Truth is not to be found there. We know too much for that, and too much to start anew. Why this has happened is a complicated question. "Culture" itself is, I have tried to say, partly responsible for what has happened to culture. But I would like to end with a few words on the latest and perhaps the last threat to our sources of freedom and inspiration.

One thing the newer movements—all of which agree about the degradation of life in modernity—never doubted is that old philosophy has been refuted, that we know better, have a higher level of consciousness, if only that we know that everything is relative to "culture." Arendt may prefer Periclean Athens, but she never doubted that Heidegger was wiser than Plato. But the only way Plato, or any old author, can be taken seriously is if one believes that the decisive truth of which we are ignorant may be found in him. Otherwise study of the classics is trifling. As merely part of our heritage, or whatever, they wither on the vine. This is what made it possible to put them in the museum. But in the museum they still had an objective existence. One could go to them if one wanted to and be solicited by them.

The danger that we might be liberated by them and not play our proper role in history is now being astutely faced by what is called "deconstructionism." It is a dogmatic, academic nihilism of the Left, and proposes to do for literature what Huey Long promised in politics: "Every man a critic." There is no text, there are only interpretations. This is the final step in making modern man satisfied with himself. There is no outside, and above all there is nothing higher. This is also the final step in so-called Marxist humanism, which recognized that "vulgar" Marxism made a travesty of literary interpretation. Of

course, "vulgar" Marxism is true Marxism. For the real Marx every consciousness is dependent on the objective relations of property. This new school liberates consciousness from Marx's trammels. But where does it really come from? It is just platitudinized Nietzsche and Heidegger, men of the Right whose whole struggle was against everything that Marxism represents.

Deconstructionism is a kind of circus performance in which Nietzsche is sawed into many pieces, and then the magician miraculously puts him back together and, lo and behold, Nietzsche is a Marxist, albeit not a "vulgar" Marxist. The most profound and intense effort on behalf of "culture"—Nietzsche's effort—is swallowed up by the Last Man. Nietzsche regrettably gave up objectivity in order to salvage art from Marxist objectivity. His work is used to further—however incoherently—Marxist objectivity by relativizing other kinds of objectivity. The invocation of Nietzsche on the Left is equivalent to Stalin's invocation of God—it makes no intellectual sense, but it helps with the simpletons. All the excitement of Nietzsche can then be used to disguise our alternatives, which are either Western or Soviet intellectual life. When there is no real Plato or Locke left, when the gentle light of great books is forever obscured by the burning torches of whimsical interpretation, our window to the world will have been closed.